

Religion and Religious Rites and Practices in Early Medieval Rajasthan

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The analysis of religious features and religious rites and practices is important for proper understanding of the political, social and economic milieu of early medieval Rajasthan. There has lately been a debate on the placing of religion as ideology in society. Some have defined it as a superstructure linked to the socio-economic base, as socially determined thought. Others have maintained that it is integrated into the larger whole in a way where, at times, ideology may be a catalyst.

It is generally held that religious condition of any society is a reflection of the nature of society. The great sociologist Emile Durkheim's¹ analysis of religion is concerned with the contribution religion makes to meet the functional pre-requisites or basic needs of society i.e. social solidarity. But Marx² explains religion as a series of myths which justify and legitimate the subordination of the subject class and the domination and privilege of the ruling class. Max Weber³ talks of channeling effects of ideas in determining people's actions. Moreover, Gramsci⁴ also talks of the hegemony of intellect. He is also concerned with autonomous functioning of ideology of which religion, folklore and philosophy constitute essential components. French structuralist anthropologist, Maurice Godelier⁵ also talks of dominance of relations of production [super-structure] such as kinship, politics and religion.

In this article, we would like to proceed with the assumption that the ideology and religion need to be studied in its totality, in its function in the society without compartmentalizing it from society, economy and polity. R. S. Sharma⁶ and R. N. Nandi and a host of scholars have thrown ample lights on such major developments in the material fabric of the post-Gupta scene in the Indian subcontinent, such as vicissitudes in urbanization, market economy, spread of agriculture,

emergence of Brahmanas as landed intermediaries, proliferation of castes etc. and their impact on religious ideas and institutions. In this background, the evaluation of the religious beliefs, rites and practices in Rajasthan during early medieval period becomes a historical necessity.

The rise of the Rajput chiefs, tracing their descent from sun and the moon, was closely related to the feudal politico-economic structure. The military obligation in the feudal relationship and the granting of land and titles, to chieftains were among the factors responsible for the rise of the Rajput clans.⁷ They seem to be of mixed origin, possibly Hinduized foreigners- Hunas and Scythians- or Hinduized tribals – Gonds, Bhars, Kharwars, Bhils etc. Although their mixed or tribal origin has not yet been conclusively proved, it is certain that the Rajput princes and chiefs, strove hard to glorify their families and roots. For being accorded a high status in the caste hierarchy they depended, upon the support of the priestly class, the brahmanas, and their keenness in this regard led to the practice of extensive gifts [dana] to the brahmanas. The Puranas ,the Smritis and other religious literature of this period duly recognize and embody in their behavior pattern Sodasa-mahadanas (16 great gifts) which include Hiranyagarbhadana⁸.The donor, by the performance of the ceremony of his rebirth through

Hiranyagarbha (goldenwomb) and dana to the officiating priests, could attain a high social status. Historical evidence supports this fact of kings of leading dynasties performing these ceremonial danas R.C Hazra⁹ observes ,from 6th century onwards dana, tirtha [pilgrimage], sacrifices [bali], vrata [vow], puja [worship], purtadharma(works of public utility) were emphasized as the highest mode of religion in Puranas.

Moreover, kings, princes and samantas wanted to aquire punya [merit] and fqame by building temples and donating land and villages for their maintenance. Again owing to obstructions in trade the surplus wealth of the feudatories and kings was not invested in it or in craft production but in conspicuous consumption¹⁰ and the erection of bigger temples which would proclaim the glory of the patrons. Tantricism also flourished and patronized by feudal class.

Religion played a very important part in lives of the people. Jaina scholar Uddyotana attaches great importance to dharma i.e. righteous conduct through which one could achieve all other ends including moksha[liberation].¹¹ But there was no narrow sectarianism; rather there is evidence of the realization of the essential unity of the Supreme Godhead, tolerance and harmony between the various religious sects. Thus a devotee would worship Gods of different

sects together. The contemporary inscriptions testify to the same. The Pratabgarh inscription of Mahendrapala II[A.D. 946]¹² refers to the Pratihara rulers and their Tutelary deities such as Vishnu, Mahesvara, Bhagvati, Aditya, Bhagwati. The Sagartal Inscription shows that Boja 1, though himself a worshipper of Bhagvati, erected within his seraglio a temple dedicated to Narakadvish [Vishnu].¹³ The Saiva ruler, Mahendrapala II, made a grant in favour of vata-yaksini-devi and his governor, Madhava, granted a village for repairs to the temple of the Sun – God.¹⁴

The cultural unity of the period expressed itself in the images of Harihara, in which one face depicted Hari and other Hara or Siva, Hari-Hara-Pitamaha, in which Brahma's face was also represented along with Siva and Visnu and Ardhanarisvara, in which the right half of the image represented Siva and the other half Parvati, as well as Panchayatana type of temples, in which one God occupied the central place of worship and the other the shrines in the four quarters, the east, west, north and south.¹⁵

Though religious competition was there but display of unnecessary religious acrimony was absent, not only among the followers of different brahmanical sects, but even among the followers of orthodox and heterodox religion. In fact, the syncretistic tendency in the Pratihara period is so strong that almost every tirtha has been given temples of all the prominent deities along with many minor deities worshipped in that particular geographical area. Prithviraja Vijaya refers to the sacred site of Pushkar as abode of Brahma but temples were also built in honour of Visnu and Shiva.¹⁶

One of the principal deities was Visnu¹⁷ known by his various names such as Narayana, Krsna, Kesava, Cakri, Govinda and Madhumatha. Various legends current in those days glorifying him as the supreme god are noted in the literature.¹⁸ Epigraphic and archaeological evidence also testify to the popularity of Visnu worship under the Pratiharas.¹⁹ Temples of Vishnu during Pratihara period existed at Peoha, Ahar, Siyadoni, Gwalior, Ghotarshi [Pratabgarh], Bayana [Bharatpur] and Kannauj.

Visnu was also worshipped in the form of incarnations such as Fish, Tortoise, Narsimha, Vamana, Vraha and Vasudeva-Krsna incarnations. The bas-relief from Kaman [Bharatpur] depicting the Matsya, Kurma, Varaha, Narsimha and Vamanavataras²⁰ and the reliefs from

Mandor near Jodhpur depicting scenes from the life of Kṛṣṇa²¹ indicate that the popularity of the incarnations of Viṣṇu in Rajasthan dates back to earlier times.

The avatara conception, which engendered a hopeful belief in the coming of a savior, or avatars who would incarnate himself for the protection of the virtuous and destruction of the wicked,²² offering strength and courage to its adherents in times of distress, and encouraging them to tread the path of virtue, added to the appeal of Vaiṣṇavism and served a useful social purpose.

By fusion of the cults of tribal's, it facilitated their assimilation into the brahmanical sect.²³ It is significant in this context that the Gopala Kṛṣṇa cult gained considerable popularity in Rajasthan, where the Abhiras, who are associated with the popularization of the marvelous deeds of the boy-God Kṛṣṇa and his dalliance with the cowherdesses are known to have been a powerful tribe in the neighbourhood of Ghatyala up to the ninth century.²⁴

Siva was also worshipped both in anthropomorphic and linga forms. Epigraphic²⁵ and archaeological²⁶ evidence testify to the popularity of Saivism in Rajasthan from early times. Siluka of the Prathara line of the Mandor built a temple of Siddhesvara Mahadeva.²⁷ From Harsnatha [Sikar] comes the images of Lakulisa, Tandavanṛtya Siva and Siva-Parvati, assignable to the 9th-10th centuries. Harihara images are found in Osia and Buckala [Jodhpur] temples of the Pratihara period.²⁸ The temple of the Chauhan tutelary deity Harsanatha Mahadeva was very famous. The Saiva sects Kapalika and Karunikas find mention in literary works. Chandakausika, 10th work pictures Kapalikas as armed with a club, carrying about a skull in hand, decorated with ashes and human bones and having meticulous powers.²⁹ The Karunikas believed in destroying of moths and insects as an act compassion.³⁰ Archaeological and epigraphic evidence testify to the popularity of both the pacific [saumya] and fierce [ugra] aspects of Sakti worship in Rajasthan from early times. Traces of Sakta ideas are found also in the literature of the Buddhas during this period.³¹ Nagbhata II, Bhoja and Mahendrapala I were devotees of Bhagwati.³² Mount Arbuda was a Saktapitha.³³ Beautiful representation of Gajalakṣmi comes from Abhaneri [Jaipur], Amjhara [Dungarpur] and Sirohi.³⁴

Kuvalayamala speaks of widespread worship of Sun-God as Ravi, Aditya.³⁵ The Imperial Pratihara ruler Rambhadra is believed to have got his son Mihira Bhoja or Bhoja I through Sun-God's favour.³⁶ Indraditya temple was built by Indraraja Chahamana, a feudatory of

Mahendrapala II.³⁷ Bhinmal was a great centre of Sun-worship, with the famous sun image called Jagatswamin.³⁸ Sun image is also found at Osia, Mandor.³⁹ and Harsanatha.⁴⁰ Thus we find that Osia, Mandor, Bhinmal and Sirohi were all important centres of sun – worship.⁴¹

Brahma was worshipped in some localities. The temple of Vasantgarh [Sirohi], built in 7th century, has a two-armed and three-faced Brahma image.⁴² The Brahma temple at Pushkara is also very ancient. Many Brahma images have been discovered at Sevadi [Marwar], Basad [Pratabgarh], Sirod [Kota], Osia [Jodhpur] ⁴³ etc.

Museum at Ajmer has, from Baghera a finely sculptured canopy with the figures of Surya, Chandra, Mangala, Budha, Guru, Sani, Rahu and Ketu.⁴⁴The worship of Ganapati is also testified by many sources such as Ghatiyala inscription of Pratihara Kakkuka, image of Ganapati-Gajalaksmi- Kubera from Abaneri,⁴⁵ Mandor.⁴⁶ Importance of Skanda is evident from the reference to shrines dedicated to him, known as Sanmukhalayas⁴⁷ and Swamigrahas.⁴⁸ From Ghoti Khatu [Nagaur] we have a beautiful image of Skanda, assignable to the 8th century A. D.⁴⁹ Kamadeva was a popular God and a beautiful plaque depicting him has been discovered as Nagara [Jaipur] assignable to the early centuries before Christ.⁵⁰

Puranas of 8th-9th century began to recognize the tantras as one of the authorities on religious matters.⁵¹Tantricism developed within Hinduism, Jainism and Buddhism. Various tantric texts like Vaisnavite Pancaratra Samhitas, Saiva Agams, Buddhist Tathagata Chyaka and Sakta Kubjikamata Tantras, were composed during 7th-8th centuries.⁵² Worship with the panchtattvas, matsya [fish], mamsa [flesh], madya [wine], mudra [posture] and maithuna [coition] was a distinctive feature of the tantric cults. Tantric texts such as the Gautamiya Tantra⁵³ and Mahanirvanatantra⁵⁴ confirm that Tantric initiation was open to members of all castes and women. The growth of tantricism in the early medieval period has been linked with the practice of land grants in tribal areas, which necessitated assignation of a high ritual status to tribal's who had been recruited as Sudras and their women who enjoyed a higher status in tribal belts, that was accomplished by providing them with tantric initiation.⁵⁵

Epigraphic, literary and numismatic evidence corroborates that Jainism enjoyed extensive patronage in early Medieval India. According to the Puratanaprabandha Samgraha, Nagbhata I extended his patronage to a Jaina Scholar named Yasadeva⁵⁶ The Jaina temple of Osia was built

during the reign of Vatsaraja of Pratihara dynasty. Jaina temple at Rohinsakupa was built by Kakkuka, the Pratihara ruler of Mandor. Evidence of Digambara Jain temples in Kota⁵⁷ and metal images from Pindavada-Sirohi testifies to the popularity of Jainism. Jainism received the patronage of the Pratihararulers, Vatsaraja, Nagabhata I and Bhoja.⁵⁸ The images of Tirthankaras have been discovered from Bansi near Chittor,⁵⁹ Vasantgarh near Sirohi,⁶⁰ and Narhad.⁶¹ Along with idol worship, mental adoration [meditation] of the Jina and the Panca- Paramesthi collectively also formed an integral part of Jina worship.⁶² Jainism drew followers from all castes. Women initiates were highly respected and they also acted as spiritual guides for men as well as women.

During this period Buddhism does not appear to have been in a flourishing state in Rajasthan except in some areas like Kota where the Shergarh inscription records the construction of a Buddhist temple and monastery by a Naga chief Devadatta.⁶³ Buddhism was in a state of decline by the time of Hieun Tsang.⁶⁴

Despite the radical difference in various religious systems we notice certain features which were common to all. They all believed in performance of charity, penance and pilgrimage to be a most effective means of securing religious merit. Those practices served as an outlet to the religious feelings of the people and also helped smoothen sectarian differences. The performance of socio-religious rites at the time of birth, marriage and death was universal and the ceremonies were more or less similar, thus contributing to the cultural unity of the period.

One way in which Hindu charity expressed itself was *Purtadharma* which included building of temples, wells, tanks, parks, distribution of food and gifts on occasion such as eclipse and some other tithis (lunar day). *Purtadharma* was the dominant ideology behind the large scale building of temples in this period. Puranas also encourage this practice not merely to members of the upper classes but sudras also as a means of accruing high religious merit.

Purtadharma along with the practice of *Tirthayatra* made Hindu faith more popular by strengthening its' base against heterodox creeds and tantricism which adopted a liberal attitude towards lower castes. It encouraged the individual to work for the benefit of the masses by establishing works of public utility and charity. It shifted the emphasis from animal sacrifices to acts of benevolence. Though it served the interest of the brahmanas who were beneficiary of most of the Dana during this period, but it was highly commendable. There are plenty of grants

recording building of temples and gifts of land to brahmanas. Prakrit works of this period clearly show that a large part of money was also spent on poor relief and public works. The excavation of step-wells and tanks is corroborated by epigraphic and archaeological evidence.

Excavations of wells, ponds etc. was not approved by Jaina faith as it involved killing of souls (Jivas) existent in earth and water⁶⁵ but dana was an essential constituent of Jaina faith⁶⁶ including Jnanadana (gift of knowledge), Abhaya dana (non-violence towards all souls) and Dharmopagraha dana (gifts of goods, drinks, clothes, medicines). Tapas or penance was highly esteemed by both Hindu and Jaina monks.

Tirthayatra was a popular religious institution with great mass appeal and of considerable antiquity. The Vanaparva of the Mahabharata gives an elaborate description of various Tirthas and the merits of Tirthayatra,⁶⁷ which were further glorified by the Puranic literature. The Kuvalayamala mentions many important Tirthas and gives an idea of the purpose behind pilgrimages for gaining absolution from their sins.⁶⁸ The Padma Purana also extols the merits of the holy waters of famous Pushkara lake.⁶⁹

The practice of Hindu Tirthayatra has been criticized by the Jaina writers in Kuvalayamala⁷⁰ and Yasastilaka of Somadeva⁷¹ but they also attached great sanctity to places associated with the life of Tirthankaras. But the pilgrimage required considerable spiritual conviction, mental and physical discipline and purity of mind. Travelling broadened one's outlook and the mingling together of people from different areas with common sense of purpose at Tirthas must have created cultural unity of the Indian subcontinent. The Kuvalayamala⁷² shows that pilgrimage was open to the poor as well as rich, and members of all the four castes. This is confirmed by the Matsya Purana and Kurma Purana.⁷³ The gathering of all these people at Tirthas served to break down religious, class and caste exclusiveness to some extent. Pushkara site which was sacred to Brahma came to have a temple of Adivaraha and on its three banks Saiva temples were built by Chahamanas rulers of Sakambari and Ajmer. Pilgrimage and Tirthas played an important role in providing the masses the easy means of attaining religious merit and salvation.

Thus, Religion and Religious rites and practices as an Ideology played a great role in the political system of early medieval Rajasthan which not only provided the monarchy with legitimate base of power but also strengthened its hold over the masses.

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